Influence of Emotional Distress, Personality Traits and Spousal Communication on Marital Stability among Married Couples in Ibadan Metropolis

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Abstract
Marital stability has implications on well-being of couples, children and the larger society. Studies on psychological factors that influence marital stability seem sketchy. Therefore, this study investigated influence of emotional distress, personality traits, and spousal communication on marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis. A cross-sectional survey design was utilized while purposive sampling technique was used to select nine organizations in Ibadan metropolis. Data were collected from 300 participants using Emotional Distress Scale, Big Five Personality Scale, Spousal Communication Scale, and Marital Stability Scale. Two hypotheses were tested using zero-ordered correlation and standard multiple regression at p < 0.05 level of significance. The results revealed that emotional distress correlated with personality traits (r = -.13, p < .05), spousal communication(r = .29, p <.05), and marital stability (r = -.188, p < .05). Also, personality traits correlated with marital stability (r = .13, p < .05). Furthermore, emotional distress independently predicted marital stability (β = -.19, p <.05). However, personality traits (β = .11, p >.05) and spousal

communication (β = .05, p > .05) did not independently predict marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis. The study concludes that emotional distress, personality traits and spousal communication tend to influence marital stability. Therefore, counselling psychologists, pastors, and older couples should guide young couples to help prevent marital instability.
Keywords: *Emotional distress, Personality traits, Spousal communication, Marital stability, Ibadan metropolis*

Introduction

Marriage is one great institution of human development and culture. It is a union of man and woman as husband and wife for the purpose of companionship, procreation and maintenance of a family (Ojukwu, 2013). Marriage comes with many benefits. It brings about companionship among couples. It gives children positive and secured lifestyle, leads to commitment and true love between partners, and gives happiness to those in the union (Bradbury *et al.*, 2000; Florex *et al.*, 2020; Mekonnen *et al.*, 2019). Also, marriage acts as a buffer against mental health problems such as alienation, loneliness, unhappiness and depression (Goppal, 2020).

Marital stability means satisfaction with the marriage partners due to their cooperation, adjustment, and tenacity to make marriage succeed (Hussani & Adejare, 2021). It is that in which spouses enjoy healthy relationship, act as a source of emotional support, companionship, sexual love and economic support for each other (Anoushka, 2020). Stable marriage produces good children and families which in turn give rise to a stable society (Ojokwu, 2013). Stable marriages are those that have no plan for divorce unlike marital instability which has the propensity to divorce.

Marital stability depends on many factors to succeed. One factor considered in this study as likely to influence marital stability is emotional distress which is the ability of individual to have good mental health which is related to the psychological well-being such as alienation, loneliness, unhappiness and depression (Goppal, 2020).

In seminal study, Renne (1970) found that psychological well-being had a positive correlation with general happiness, perception of overall individual health and marital stability of married couples. Furthermore, higher marital stability was negatively associated with feelings of isolation and depression.

Also, Williams (2003) found that marital stress tends to increase depression and decrease overall satisfaction with life for both men and women. As the quality of marriage declines, the advantages—such as social support—associated with being married also decline. This means, as the level of marital quality declines,

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the effect on psychological well-being increases more than marital satisfaction will protect psychological well-being (Williams 2003).

Finally, Gove *et al*. (1983) posit that marital quality is a more significant influence on the mental health of women while marital status is a more important factor in predicting men's mental wellbeing. This may reflect a difference in events preceding depressive symptoms between the two genders, as well as differences in representative benefits of marriage.

The second factor considered in this study as likely to influence marital stability is personality traits of the married couple. Personality is the enduring characteristics of an individual over time (American Psychological Association, 2017).The Five Factor Traits of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience and extraversion have been widely used to explained human personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Larsen & Buss, 2005). Extraversion explains characteristics such as talkative, sociable and adventurous (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Individuals with high scores on extraversion scale tend to have marital stability than individuals with low scores in extraversion (Stroud *et al.*, 2010). Agreeableness trait includes good-natured, cooperative, trusting, and forgiving (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Individuals high in agreeableness seem to avoid conflicts and want everyone to get along. The goal of agreeable

individuals is cooperation and harmony in social interactions. Conscientiousness describes individuals who are scrupulous, perseverance, and well-organized (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Conscientious individuals have the characteristics of being punctual, organized, reliable, and hardworking (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Conscientious individuals have healthier romantic relationships that are more stable (Larson & Buss, 2005). Emotional stability is represented by traits such as being less nervous, less moody, and even-tempered mentality (Goldberg, 1993). Emotionally stable people cope with life stresses in a way different from people who are emotionally unstable. Finally, openness to experience includes traits such as imaginativeness, curiosity and creativity (Goldberg, 1993). Individuals rated high on the openness to experience scale have novel activities, are opened about the ideas of extramarital affairs than individuals low on openness to experience scale (Larson & Buss, 2005)

Studies have revealed that couples' personality traits affect marital stability. For example, Maloouff *et al*. (2010) found that couples with higher agreeableness and conscientiousness scores displayed higher marital stability while couples higher on neuroticism scores showed lower marital stability. Also, Karamptsos (2011) found that couples who scores higher on extraversion,

agreeableness, conscientious and lower scores in neuroticism tend to be among those with greater marital stability. Stroud *et al.* (2010) found that neuroticism and extraversion were related to marital stability among married couples. Also, Dyrenforth *et al.* (2010) provided consistent support that agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability are three robust personality traits that tends to predict marital stability.

Finally, while Robins *et al.* (2000) found spousal personality traits to be associated with better marital stability, Watson *et al.* (2004) did not find significant correlation between personality traits and marital stability. Perhaps as suggested by Gattis *et al.* (2005), the main reason why people choose their partners for engagement or marriage are still poorly understood.

The final factor considered in this study as likely to influence marital stability among married couples is spousal communication which is described as a tool used by couples to create and manage relationships (Suleyiman & Zewdu, 2018). Olson and Defrain (2000) view communication as the heart of intimate relationship and the foundation on which all other relationships are built including successful marital relationship. Therefore, the ability and the willingness to communicate have been cited to be among the most significant factors in maintaining a strong, vibrant and stable marital relationship (Ekot & Usoro, 2006; Anyakoha & James, 2004). Also, some

studies have found overall marital stability was higher among couples who rated their communication as good compared to those couples who rated their communication skills as poor (Abubakar, 2016; Fowers, 1990; Njui *et al.*, 2021, Suleyiman & Zewdu, 2018).

Amri et al. (2011) had examined the relationship between personality traits, communication styles and marital stability. They found that married couples who have compatible personality traits, good communication skills and less emotional distress reported more marital stability than couples that are deficits in these qualities. Whether the results found in previous studies can be found in Nigeria and Oyo State in particular, this study, therefore, this study was carried out to determine whether emotional distress, personality traits and couples communication would influence marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study were (i) to examine the relationship among emotional distress, personality traits, spousal communication and marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis, and (ii) to determine whether emotional distress, personality traits and spousal communication would independently predict marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis.

The results of this study would help married couples to have positive attitudes toward handling their marital

issues with less stress and thus understand those factors that contribute to marital stability. Also, counselling psychologists and marriage counsellors would find the results of this study useful for their psychotherapeutic practices. Finally, welfare homes which in most cases adjudicate among couples that are experiencing conflicts in their marriage would find the results useful when resolving marital conflict among couples.

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were generated and tested in this study.

1. There will be significant relationship among emotional distress, personality traits, spousal communication and marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis.
2. Emotional distress, personality traits and spousal communication will independently predict marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis.

Method

Design

The study was a cross-sectional survey research design. The independent variables were emotional distress, personality traits and spousal communication while the dependent variable is marital stability.

Setting

This study was conducted in Ibadan metropolis in Oyo State. The locations selected within the metropolis were churches, mosques, markets, recreational centres and health centres.

Sampling and sampling technique

Purposive sampling technique was used to select nine locations within Ibadan metropolis while convenience sampling was used to select the participants for the study.

Participants

Descriptive analysis showed that 163(54.3%) participants were males, while 137 (45.7%) were females. The age of the participants ranges from 25 to 65 years old. Marital status revealed that 254(84.7%) participants were married, 40(13.3%) were singles, 6(2%) were divorced. The years in marriage revealed that 203 (67.7%) of the participants have less than 5 years in marriage, 51(17%) 5-10 years in marriage, 31(10.3%) 11-15 years in marriage, 4 (1.3%) 16-20 years in marriage, while 11 (3.7%) have been 20 years and above in marriage. In term of religious affiliations, 154(51.3%) participants were Muslims, while 146(48.7%) were Christians. The educational qualifications revealed that 274 (91.3%) of the participants have a tertiary education, 13 (4.3%) of the participants had First School Leaving Certificate, 11(3.7%) of the participants have Senior School Certificate, while 2 (0.7%) have no

educational qualifications. Many of the participants 243(82.3%) were from nuclear family, while 53(17.7%) were from extended family structure. Finally, in term of employment status, 72(34%) of the participants were civil servants, 136 (45.3%) were in business, while 92(30.7%) were in other types of professions.

Instruments

Four instruments were used for data collection.

Emotional Distress: This was measured using Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) developed by Kessler *et al*. (2003). It is a 10-item self-report scale presented on 5-point Likert's format ranges from none of the time (1) to all of the time (5). Sample items include: 'During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel tired out for no good reason?' and 'During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel worthless?' The K-10 scores range from 10-50. The scoring procedure indicates that score under 20 are likely to be well, score 20-24 are likely to have a mild mental disorder; score 25-29 are likely to have a moderate mental disorder, and score 30 and above are likely to have a severe mental disorder. Low scores indicate low levels of psychological distress and high scores indicate high level of psychological distress. The authors reported the scale's Cronbach alpha that ranged from 0.42 to 0.74. The scale in the present study has Cronbach alpha of 0.71.

Personality Traits: This was measured using a 10-item short version of the Big Five Personality Inventory developed by Rammstedt and John (2007). The scale used 5-point Likert's response formats ranging from agree strongly (5) to disagree strongly (1). Item 1 and 5 measures extraversion, item 2 and 7 measures agreeableness, item 3 and 8 measures conscientiousness, item 4 and 9 measures neuroticism while item 5 and 10 measures openness to experience with high number indicating presence of a particular personality. Item 1, 7, 3, 4, and 5 are reversed items. Sample items include: 'I see myself as someone who is reserved' and 'I see myself as someone who is outgoing and sociable'. The scale has Cronbach alpha of 0.64. The scale in this study has Cronbach alpha of 0.67.

Spousal Communication: This was measured using Marital Communication Scale developed by Esere *et al*. (2011). The scale consists of 20 items which is presented on a 5-point Likert's format ranges from strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree(2), and strongly disagree (1). Sample items include: 'Effective communication promotes intimacy among couples' and 'Communication is a key to a successful marriage'. The authors reported the scale's Cronbach alpha of .67. The scale in the present study has a Cronbach alpha of 0.65.

Marital Stability This was measured using the Family Assessment Device (FAD), a subscale of McMaster Family Functioning Scale designed by Epstein et al. (1983). The scale consists of 12 items presented on a 4-point Likert's format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Sample items include: 'We confide in each other' and 'We avoid discussing our fears and concerns'. All odd items were reverse scored. Both the internal reliability and validity of the FAD have been demonstrated in prior research. Miller *et al.* (1985) reported the scale's Cronbach alpha that ranges from 0.74 to 0.92. The scale in the present study reported Cronbach alpha of 0.81.

Procedure
The researchers approached programme coordinators at different centres including churches, couples' meetings, health centres, markets, shopping malls, eateries, and banks. The researchers sought individual's consent to participate in the study. The participants were assured of anonymity and that participation was voluntary. After obtaining individual's consent, the researchers gave the questionnaire to those who were willing to participate in the study. It took less than 15 minutes to complete the questionnaires. A total of 315 questionnaires were distributed, 309 (i.e., 98% response rate) were retrieved, nine questionnaires were half-filled and were discarded, while the remaining 300 questionnaires were used for the final analysis.

Statistical analysis
The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Descriptive statistic was used to summarize the socio-demographic data while zero-ordered correlation and standard multiple regression analysis were used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results
H1 There will be a significant relationship among emotional distress, personality traits, spousal communication and marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis. The hypothesis was tested using zero-ordered correlation and the result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Zero-ordered correlations of emotional distress, personality traits, spousal communication, and marital stability

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1 Emotional distress	2.2710	.72536	-			
2 Personality traits	3.2950	.67264	-	.128*	-	
3 Spousal communication	3.3167	.53587	.290*	-.091	-	
4 Marital stability	4.3473	.41453	-	.188*	.128*	-.016 -

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 1 shows that emotional distress negatively correlated with personality traits (r =-.128, *p* < .05), spousal communication (r = .290, p <.05), and negatively correlated with marital stability (r = -.188, *p* < .05). Furthermore, personality traits positively correlated with marital stability(r = .128, *p* < .05). However, personality traits did not correlate with spousal communication (r = - .091, *p* > .05) and marital stability (r = .016, *p* > .05). The hypothesis was partially accepted.

H2 Emotional distress, personality traits and spousal communication will independently predict marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis. The hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Multiple regressions showing emotional stress, personality traits and spousal communication as independent predictors of marital stability among married couples

Criterion	Predictors	β	*t*	*p*
Marital stability	Emotional distress	-.19	-3.156	<.05
	Personality traits	.11	1.895	>.05
	Spousal communication	.05	.821	>.05

Table 2 shows that emotional distress independently predicted marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis (β = -.19, *p* <.05). However, personality traits (β = .11, *p* >.05) and spousal communication (β = .05, *p* > .05) did not independently predict marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis.

Discussion
The study investigated influence of emotional distress, personality traits and spousal communication on marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis. Two hypotheses were generated and tested in this study. The result of the zero-ordered correlation reveals that emotional distress negatively correlated with personality traits. This implies that when emotional distress increases, personality trait decreases. Also, the result shows positive correlation between emotional distress and spousal communication. This indicates that when emotional distress increases, spousal communication increases. Furthermore, emotional distress and marital stability had negative correlation. This demonstrates that when emotional distress increases, marital stability decreases. Finally, personality traits positively correlated with marital stability. This means that as personality traits increases, marital stability increases. However, personality traits did not correlate with spousal communication which implies that irrespective of the couple's

personality, it does not affect their communication. Lastly, spousal communication did not correlate with marital stability meaning that spousal communication did not influence marital stability. Taken together, hypothesis one was partially supported. This result corroborated the earlier findings by Horwitz *et al.* (1998) that the balance between negative interactions and positive interactions with spouse are the strongest influence of marital stability among their study participants. Also, the present results supported Amri *et al.*'s (2011) finding that married couples who have compatible personality traits, good communication skills and less emotional distress had more marital stability and thus marital satisfaction than couples' deficits in these qualities. Specifically, this study confirmed Robins *et al.*'s (2000) result that spousal personality traits was associated with better marital stability. Individuals high in conscientiousness score reported higher in marital stability and satisfaction.

Also, the finding in this study lent credence to previous findings (Njui *et al.*, 2021; Suleyiman & Zewdu, 2018) that overall marital satisfaction and stability was higher among couples who rated their communication as good, meaning that effective communication contributes to happy, satisfying and stable marriages. Santrock (2002) found that lack of communication was high on women's reasons for divorce whereas for men it was insignificance.

The hypothesis that emotional distress, personality traits and spousal communication will independently predict marital stability among married couples in Ibadan metropolis reveals that only emotional distress independently predicted marital stability. However, personality traits and spousal communication did not independently predict marital stability. The finding in this study contradict Usoroh *et al.*'s (2010) who found that spousal communication style and not emotional distress and personality traits predicted marital stability among married couples. Achieving stable marriage relationship, spouses should have good emotional health, good communication skills, and compatible personality traits.

Recommendations of the Study
Based on the findings in this study, the following recommendations are proffered. All stakeholders interested in the family and marriage including counselling psychologists, marriage counsellors, religious leaders and older married couples should be actively involved in providing marital counselling to potential couples before and during marriage in order to have a more stable marital relationship. Two, the government, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders should organize marriage seminars, symposia and panel discussions for couples to raise awareness regarding factors contributing to couples' communication problems and marital instability.

Limitations and suggestions for further studies: This study identified some

shortcomings which need to be noted. The study was conducted in one Local Government Area (LGA) and in only nine locations in Ibadan metropolis using a sample of 300 participants. This limits generalization. Further study should include more LGAs with larger sample size. Second, self-report questionnaires were used for data collection which does not rule out response bias. Further study should include interview methods, use of participant's diary, and focus group interviews with married couples who are having problems in their marriage. This will give richer and valid results. Finally, three independent variables were investigated in this study. Further study should include social support, self-esteem, learned helplessness, etc, to study marital stability among married couples.

Conclusion

Based on the findings in this study, the following conclusions were drawn. Emotional distress, personality traits, and spousal communication had significant relationship on marital stability. Also, emotional distress independently predicted marital stability. However, personality traits and spousal communication did not independently predict marital stability.

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